



## FEATURE



# POWER & ANXIETY: RELIGION & CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The troubles in Syria and Iraq did not begin as religious conflicts. For most of his time in power, Saddam Hussein sought to foster an Iraqi national identity. Bashir al-Assad, like his father, did something similar in Syria.

There was of course potential for conflict to take a religious turn. At some point in the 1990s, the essentially secularist Saddam began to emphasize (and instrumentalize) piety—Sunni piety. Perhaps more importantly, following the collapse of his regime, the Coalition Provisional Authority made a number of policy decisions that reinforced

religious and ethnic identity. As Emma Sky has it in *The Unraveling*, the last great hope for a more inclusive national sensibility rested with the *Iraqiyya* coalition—the Iraqi National Movement (INM)—and its non-sectarian approach. When, following the 2010 elections, the Obama administration determined to throw its weight behind





Prime Minister Maliki and his Shi'i Islamic Dawa party, rather than Ayyad Allawi and the INM—despite the fact that the latter had won more seats in Parliament—the new government set a course that emphasized Shi'i power, enhanced ties with Iran, and alienated Sunni Muslims.

A similar pattern of Sunni-Shi'i polarization played out in Syria: the core supporters of both Assads were a coalition of Alawite Muslims and various Christian groups. While many Syrians claimed a more or less secular identity, they were also Sunni Muslims. And, when the government responded to demonstrations inspired by the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere with terrifying levels of force, some of those who organized for resistance did so in the name of religion—a phenomenon that gained momentum as internationally recognized Sunni scholars began to speak about Bashir al-Assad's policies in sectarian terms and large numbers of foreign fighters entered the fray.

In both of these cases, the potential for religious conflict was there, but tapping that power was a matter of human action. This is a basic point, though it seems important to make it. As conflicts in the region multiply, bringing to the fore longstanding differences in doctrine and recitations of historic grievances, one might be tempted to think of fighting between Sunni and Shi'a, or for that matter, among diverse groups of Sunni Muslims as something inevitable. It is not. As is the case with every religious tradition we know, Islam in both its Sunni and Shi'i forms contains resources which, in the right hands and under the right circumstances, can produce saints; in other hands and under other circumstances, the product can be genocide. If (as seems obvious) we are currently witnessing something very close to the latter end of the spectrum, we ought not forget about the possibilities represented by the former.

In what follows, I shall explain some of the religious factors at stake in Syria and Iraq. The discussion begins with the Islamic State group (hereafter, IS); in this connection, it

will be necessary to say something about the intra-Sunni rivalry between IS and al-Qa`ida. I shall then move to the Shi'i side, with a particular focus on the Islamic Republic of Iran. In each case, the point will be to demonstrate that, beneath the surface of assertions of righteousness, beneath the confident or triumphalist claims, there is a strong sense of anxiety. In a brief conclusion, I shall offer some thoughts on the way this mix might color the response of Americans and our allies.

## **VICTORY AND OBEDIENCE: THE PROGRAM OF IS**

The story of IS—its career in Iraq as an al-Qa`ida affiliate, the difficult and ultimately broken relationship between IS leaders and Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the proclamation of a Caliphate—is by now well known. The specifically religious aspects of the IS program, however, deserve further attention.

We can begin with a speech delivered by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani at the start of Ramadan in 2014. Al-Adnani, a Syrian who grew up in Iraq and spent time in a prison run by the Coalition Provisional Authority, is an important spokesperson for IS. The transcript of a video entitled “This is the Promise of Allah,” released in connection with the designation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as Caliph, provides a noteworthy example of al-Adnani's rhetoric. As well, the speech provides a window through which we may learn how IS leaders think about their group and its mission.

Al-Adnani begins by reciting verses of the Qur'an in which God promises “the succession” to human beings. The translation builds on the Arabic root from which the term *khilafat* (Caliphate) is derived. Al-Adnani understands the verse to point to authority in matters of religion and politics.

God's promise comes with a condition, however. Leadership, in the sense of al-Adnani's text, comes to those who are obedient, “submitting to Allah's command in everything big and small.” Only those whose actions conform to divine directives receive “the



ability to build, reform, remove oppression, spread justice, and bring about safety and tranquility.” To put this in a broader context, one might note the way that major portions of the speech rehearse the history of the Muslim *umma* or community. Brought into being by God’s action, this community represented—and represents—the latest act in the divine plan to create a proper order of relations between created things, with human beings as the viceregents of God. Jews, Christians, and other groups heard God’s call but fell short. The mission of the new community is thus to remind these groups of God’s call, and to find success in implementing the divine plan.

As the speech continues, al-Adnani notes that the *umma* did not always carry out its mission. Now, however, the “time has come for the *ummah* of Muhammad...to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonor, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace...The sun of jihad has risen. The glad tidings of good are shining. Triumph looms on the horizon. The signs of victory have appeared.”

Foremost among those signs is of course the emergence of the Islamic State. As it happens, the establishment of the state is also an important aspect of obedience. Once IS gained control over sufficient territory, there “remained only one matter...the *khilafah*—the abandoned obligation of the era.” Declaring that the Muslim community “sins by abandoning” this obligation, al-Adnani outlines the process of consultation by which senior leaders of IS determined that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi should be designated as the leader for Muslims everywhere, meaning that all believers should consider themselves obligated to swear allegiance to him and thus to the state al-Baghdadi represents.

At this point, a brief comparison with al-Qa`ida is in order. Usama bin Ladin, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and other leaders of the group always had in mind the establishment of an Islamically legitimate political order. As al-Zawahiri put it, “true reform” involves, first, the rule of Shari`a; second, the freedom of the traditionally Muslim areas from

foreign domination; and third, the ability of the *umma* to carry out its duty to command right and forbid wrong. With respect to these goals, military or para-military operations carried out by individuals and small groups provided a necessary means. Attacks on the “far enemy” in New York, Washington, London, and elsewhere were intended to persuade international powers to withdraw from Muslim lands; the participation of al-Qa`ida affiliates in protracted civil wars were meant to weaken existing regimes in those lands, so as to create space for new leadership to emerge. With respect to actually declaring a Caliphate, al-Qa`ida leaders were restrained, however. Theirs was a gradualist vision, whereby Muslim peoples freed from tyranny might be educated and brought to the point of establishing proper governance, first in more delimited regions, and then through recognition of a more general or universal union.

The vision of IS is different. As al-Adnani put it, true governance consists in “compelling the people to do” that which God commands. A group that comes into power, in the sense of effective control of a territory sufficiently large to require administration, must establish a state consistent with the designation *khilafat*. Otherwise, obedience will be lacking, and the promise of God will be unfulfilled.

Similarly, a community of believers may fail in obedience if it fails to govern according to the Shari`a. The strategic program of IS begins with a focus on building the state and its institutions. One aspect of this involves *jihad*, in the sense of a continuing effort to defend the territory under IS control and, where possible, to extend it by overcoming rival groups. Shi`i forces—here understood to include the Iraqi army and various militias linked to Iran, as well as all those associated with the Assad regime—are identified as *rawafid*, a term that suggests a combination of heresy and treason. These are to be removed from the territory of an Islamic polity, as are Sunni groups that do not obey the command to swear loyalty to the Islamic State. Other forces involved in conflict with the State not only place their



soldiers in harm's way, but (according to IS' reasoning) make their civilian populations into legitimate targets for those allied with IS, either as the objects of armed attack or as captives who may be enslaved.

If the foregoing describes the foreign policy of the IS, its domestic policy is no less a matter of implementing the leadership's understanding of Shari'a. For Muslims, IS policy involves programs of education and welfare. The former focuses on religious instruction, so that citizens understand their obligations. The latter provides basic goods like food and health care. IS publications urge gentleness in these programs, so as to win people over gradually. Nevertheless, the policy of the state is strongly oriented toward "commanding right and forbidding wrong," so that IS forces function as a kind of morals police, and people quickly learn that women who dress improperly or appear in public without proper male accompaniment, or people who smoke, drink alcohol, or engage in other forbidden behaviors will be punished.

For non-Muslims, the reality is different. IS policy treats Christians as a people of the Book, along the lines signified by the term *dhimmi*. Sometimes rendered as "tolerated people," other times "protected," the idea is that the "people of the cross" should be offered a bargain. They may convert to Islam, and thus join IS; or they may pay tribute, here in the sense of *al-jizya*, a tax that pays to cover services provided by the state, as well as to foster a sense of lesser standing. In this case, agreement constitutes a covenant between Christians and IS. So long as the former conduct themselves properly, their communities may continue to function. They may conduct services of worship, for example, though they must do so in ways that do not suggest that Christianity is equal to Islam.

To those familiar with historic Islam, this pattern is quite familiar. As with other aspects of its program, the IS leadership cites precedents from Abbasid period (roughly, 750-1258), when scholars developed a set of judgments about social arrangements in the context of an imperial state. In this, Abbasid

institutions provided an Islamic example of arrangements one sees in the other great empires of the time—say, the Byzantine or Sassanian polities. In the modern era, however, a number of the practices associated with the *dhimmi* system fell into disuse. IS understands its program as a restoration of properly Islamic governance. Perhaps this explains the harshness of the group's treatment of Christian communities. Remembering al-Adnani's remarks about the connection between obedience and victory, we may perhaps comprehend something of the zeal by which the group carries out reform. As he put it:

Here the flag of the Islamic State...rises and flutters... Beneath it, the walls of the tyrants have been demolished, their flags have fallen, and their borders have been destroyed. Their soldiers have been killed, imprisoned, or defeated. The Muslims are honored. The unbelievers are disgraced. The Sunni Muslims are masters and are esteemed. The people of heresy are humiliated. The Shari'a penalties are implemented...The frontlines are defended. Crosses and [Christian] graves are demolished... Courts have been established to resolve disputes...Lessons and classes have been held...and, by the grace of Allah, the religion has become completely for Allah.

The IS project is a matter of establishing a social order considered legitimate by the membership because of its consistency with divine law. In this, the group combines an emphasis on a certain understanding of justice, in the sense of doing what is understood to be right, with an impulse toward purity, in the sense that if things are not ordered correctly, the community is in danger. The promise of God thus comes not only with a condition, but also with a warning. Those who fail in obedience will not succeed. They will instead become the objects of divine punishment, expressed in terms of dishonor and defeat.

In this connection, it seems appropriate to say that for all the bravado and triumphalist rhetoric of al-Adnani's speech, there is an undercurrent of anxiety. This aspect of IS is, I think, not well understood. And, as with the other themes outlined in "This is the





Promise of Allah,” concern about the security of the group’s accomplishments is reinforced in a variety of IS publications. For example, an issue of the online magazine *Dabiq* from December/January 2014/2015 includes “Advice for the Soldiers of the Islamic State,” from Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, the *nom du guerre* of an earlier leader of the group, who died in 2010. The article is a reprint of his Ramadan greetings from 2007.

Abu Hamzah’s concern is first and foremost with the religious practice of IS fighters. They must fight with the proper motive. To that end, they must maintain proper Shari`a observance: praying, fasting, keeping covenants, avoiding gossip and backbiting, and of course respecting the IS leadership. They should also understand something about the condition of the polity they serve. This is not, he writes, the state of Harun al-Rashid, the great caliph of Arabian Nights. When al-Rashid led the Muslims, he could declare to the clouds that wherever they dropped rain, it would always fall on a group of Muslims. By contrast, IS is the “State of the vulnerable.” It is so because of external enemies, but also because of the continual threat of disobedience. Indeed, the enemies within—those who disobey and undermine the state—pose a greater threat than those without.

Where success abounds, danger nonetheless remains. This is also the message of the August 2015 issue of *Dabiq*. The cover image features the Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan in deep conversation with President Obama. The caption beneath the photo reads “From the Battle of al-Ahzab to the War of Coalitions.” The former refers to one of the most famous encounters between the early Muslims and their enemies. The Arabic term points to a confederation or coalition of tribes that came up to Medina to place it under siege and thus to force Muhammad’s surrender. As the Muslims organized to fight outside the city, so as to prevent the establishment of the enemy’s plan, they received word that the Banu Qurayza, one of the Jewish tribes of Medina, was planning to renounce its treaty of cooperation with Muhammad and join the opposition. Responding to this news, some of

the Muslims begged to leave the front so as to secure their families and homes. The Prophet refused, and the Muslims were eventually victorious over both external and internal enemies (that is, over the confederated tribes and the Banu Qurayza). But the sense of threat in accounts of this episode is palpable, and in Muslim thinking about war, it constitutes a classic case of emergency.

The message is clear: the coalition of forces fighting against IS constitutes a modern day version of the enemies of the early Muslims. These include the United States, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, several members of the European Union, and now Russia. There are also enemies within: first, the Sunni Muslim groups who continue to resist the order to swear allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; and second, ordinary Muslims who leave the territory of Islam.

Here the reference is to the waves of people trying to make their way to Europe over the last few months. An article entitled “The Danger of Abandoning Darul-Islam” (the territory or abode of Islam) displays the photograph of Aylan Kurdi, the three year old whose corpse washed up on a Turkish beach and led to an international outcry regarding the problems faced by families trying to escape a war zone. IS’ take on the matter was different. People who leave the territory of Islam disobey God. They place themselves and their families in harm’s way. Further, they deprive the Islamic State of important resources, by failing to place their talents and their wealth in its service. The threat is as real as in the days of the Prophet. Despite its successes, the Islamic State recognizes it is vulnerable, existing in a state of emergency.

## **GUARDING THE REVOLUTION: THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN**

In IS polemics, Shi`i Muslims are objects of particular scorn, not least with respect to eschatology. The doctrine of the hidden Imam, according to which Muhammad al-Mahdi (the twelfth Imam or leader designated as the successor of the Prophet) has been in occultation since 873-74, receives much attention





from IS. This is so not least because IS itself is acutely interested in the last things and wants to make sure that its members get the right story.

More typically, however, the Shi`a are described as already noted. They are *rawafid*, “turncoats,” or sometimes “Safavids,” a term that connects them to Iran. Eliminating the “filthy Safavids” is integral to the IS program.

By contrast, the formal rhetoric of the Islamic Republic of Iran seems rather tame. The Ayatollah Khamenei’s remarks to a mid-August gathering in Tehran deny that the fighting in the region is a war between Shi` and Sunni Muslims. This, he said, is a “political war,” and the “most important duty is to remove these conflicts.”

Khamaneï nevertheless referred to IS when he spoke of the “violent despicable criminal *takfiri*<sup>1</sup> circles” operating in the region. The

problem, as he describes it, does not really stem from Islam, however. The establishment of such groups is rather a means by which the United States seeks to undermine the Islamic Republic of Iran and to reverse the gains of the revolution of 1978 and 1979. The policies of the U.S. represent the “plots” of an oppressive regime that arrogates power to itself without regard for “human morality.” The goal of “the arrogance” is twofold: first, to create conflict, and then to exploit any divisions that result so as to bring the peoples and states of the region under its influence.

For Khamenei, then, the great threat stems from the United States, or more generally from the West. This comes as no surprise. A more recent speech delivered at the tomb of the Ayatollah Khomeini recalls that leader’s description of America as the Great Satan: “That is a very wise saying...Satan only deceives man, but the U.S. deceives, murders, and imposes sanctions.”





What is surprising, at least at first, is Khamenei's lack of passion against IS in these comments. And despite Khamenei's characterization of conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere as political rather than religious, understanding this matter requires some analysis of the distinctively religious features of Iranian policy.

The Preamble to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic declares that the distinctive feature of the state is its "ideological and Islamic character." The former term suggests an aspiration to form a government devoted to a systematic implementation of the political, economic, and social aspects of Islam. The Preamble describes the lack of such a program as the primary reason for the failure of earlier generations to resist the influence of non-Muslim powers. The text goes on to indicate that, so long as Muslims considered their faith in merely spiritual terms, Europe, and more recently the U.S., could entice believers with high-sounding discourses about democracy and human rights. That such utterances were really a disguise for a will toward domination on the part of the West remained hidden from view.

The Ayatollah Khomeini's great achievement, the Preamble claims, was to connect this insight with a popular movement, and thus to bring into being an Islamic republic. Similarly, the text indicates that the great aspiration of subsequent leaders should be to oversee a continuing revolution in which the institutions and policies of the state are continually subjected to critique; this should be a matter for the entire society, since "the believers, men and women, are guardians of one another, they enjoin the good and forbid the evil", (Qur'an 9:71).

In matters of domestic policy, the Constitution commits the Islamic Republic to a program by which an educated citizenry will participate in democratic institutions, so that policy is a matter of consultation. This process takes place under the watchful eye of those charged to guard the Islamic character of the state, however. The Revolutionary Guard, the committee of religious experts, and the

Supreme Leader see to this, so that the long arm of the West does not interfere with internal affairs.

In matters of foreign policy, there are similar goals in play; similar desires to ensure independence from Western interference. Thus, article 152 commits the Islamic Republic to programs intended to eliminate all forms of domination. As the article continues, this means not only taking those measures necessary to maintain Iran's independence, but also "the defence of the rights of all Muslims." And, at article 154, we learn that the Islamic Republic is committed to support of "the just struggles of the *mustad'afun* [oppressed] against the *mustakbirun* [oppressors] in every corner of the globe."

These phrases help to distinguish the religious vision of the Islamic Republic from that of IS. Since the established religion of the state is Twelver Shi'ism, and Iran famously supports Shi'i groups in Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere, it is natural to think that the goal is to create a kind of Shi'i sphere of influence across the Middle East, and from that to exert the kind of power characteristic of a regional hegemon. Neither the Constitution nor the rhetoric of Khamenei support that, however. The "just struggles of the *mustad'afun*" suggest a broader set of concerns. Thus, while the term includes Shi'i populations throughout the region, it also includes the predominantly Sunni Muslims of Palestine, and one could argue that one of the reasons Iran is so determined to support the Syrian government has to do with the desire to maintain a regime willing to serve as a reliable conduit for financial and other forms of support to those engaged in resistance to Israel. Iran's policy is thus less a matter of Sunni-Shi'i rivalry (though Khamenei has plenty to say about the nefarious influence of the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance), and more about a kind of Muslim ecumenism in which people collaborate in order to push back the oppression or "global arrogance" of the United States and its allies. Exclusivist or anti-Shi'i groups are to be opposed. But their activities are the fruits of ignorance or weakness, and ultimately serve the purposes of non-Muslim powers.







## CONCLUDING REMARKS

As with IS, the rhetoric of the Islamic Republic of Iran combines triumphalism with anxiety. Thus, in the aforementioned speech at Khomeini's tomb, a declaration that "in 25 years there will be no such thing as the Zionist regime in the region" is joined with the claim that for the United States, the negotiations leading to an agreement regarding Iran's nuclear program "are a pretext and a means to infiltrate [Iran] and to impose their desires" on the country.

What is the source of this anxiety, and what does it mean with respect to U.S. policy in the region?

In one sense, the answer is tied to the nature of human beings. Reinhold Niebuhr, among others, taught us to think of anxiety as one of the most characteristic features of human action. Sensing our fragility, we are prone to develop our projects in ways intended to enhance our security—in which case the result may often be described in terms of the will to power. Particularly in cases where such plans are associated with the high ideals of religion and patriotism, our self-involvement may be hidden from our view. Convinced of our own righteousness, we are then able to justify policies that a more sober analysis would never approve.

That the leadership of IS and of the Islamic Republic would speak and act in the ways described is thus predictable. In the latter case, the story of CIA involvement in bringing the Shah to power in 1953, along with subsequent U.S. support for his authoritarian regime, serves to reinforce fears of conspiratorial aims. By some accounts, at least, Khamenei is a firm believer in this and in related stories concerning U.S. designs on his country.

In addition to these general and historical considerations, I think we might add a more specifically religious notion, which has to do with perceptions of the seductive power of what Muslim authors call *jahiliyya*. The term denotes a combination of negative states: ignorance, forgetfulness, heedlessness. As a



religious notion, it often serves as a description of the condition of the Arab tribes prior to the career of the Prophet. Thus al-Adnani cites familiar traditions in which the people living in the Arabian Peninsula were of all humanity the most pitiable, unable to cooperate in carrying out the most basic of social tasks. Then the light of Islam shone upon them, fostering discipline and unity through godly fear.

For twentieth century writers like Abu'l a'la Mawdudi (in India and Pakistan, d. 1978) and Sayyid Qutb (in Egypt, d. 1966) *jahiliyya* took on a somewhat different meaning. Qutb in particular saw heedlessness as a constant threat, a seductive power that can take different forms. The appeal of wealth, the pleasures of the flesh, the temptation to think too highly (or too little) of oneself, resisting discipline—all these are general ways to put the matter. In a modern setting, such temptations mesh with the (so called) values of great civilizations, so that democracy, capitalism, communism, and the like become manifestations of *jahiliyya*. Their power is enhanced by the prestige of great states, whose use of global media relentlessly portrays such values as tied to success, with alternatives characterized as backward, primitive, or degraded. Those who do not take







up the disciplines associated with Islam are easily taken in. Their minds, one might say, are colonized. The beginnings of liberation rest in accepting the discipline signified by the pronouncement that “there is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Prophet.”

When IS leaders warn about the vulnerability of the state, and the Ayatollah Khamenei about the designs of “the arrogance” upon Iran, they have something like this in mind. They are, of course, worried about the military and economic power of the United States and its allies. And no one should doubt that a wise and judicious exercise of that power must be an aspect of an international response. Such spokesmen are also worried about their ability to hold the hearts and minds of Muslims, however. To put it another way, al-Adnani and the Ayatollah Khamenei understand the allure of Europe and North America. And this makes them anxious.

When most Muslims look at IS, they see a group claiming the mantle of Islam to cover behaviors that cannot be justified. Attacks on airliners filled with tourists; or attacks in a busy section of Beirut or across Paris do not represent the faith most hold dear; rather, these acts represent a betrayal of the Prophet. They may also be construed as examples of

cases in which anxiety leads people to overreach. The publication of Al-Adnani’s “This is the Promise of Allah” came at a high point in IS’ campaign. By late November of 2015, the amount of territory under the group’s control had been reduced by about one-fourth. Assuming that trend continues, so that IS continues to lose territory in Syria and Iraq, we should expect more instances of such violence. They are in one sense desperate attempts to persuade those who would fight IS to back off. We should also expect more reports of large scale executions and mass killings within the territory IS does control.

Even so with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Particularly with respect to its continuing support for the regime led by Bashir al-Assad, Iran does great damage to its reputation among Muslims who rightly see this support as inconsistent with any claim to support the cause of those oppressed. And, with respect to domestic policy, reports of a recent crackdown on dissenters show the marks of the Ayatollah Khamenei’s fears about American influence.

For all their problems, the Western democracies continue to represent a way of ordering life possessed of great appeal. Such understanding feeds the sense of anxiety exemplified in IS publications and in the speeches of Khamenei. And this indicates a direction for the crafting of policy by Europe, the United States, and others. I suggest that enhancing those aspects of constitutional democracy which hold forth the promise of freedom, security, and hope for the future may be as crucial as anything else. [P]

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1. The term refers to the device by which groups like IS declare that Muslims who dissent from their programs are no longer believers, and are thus legitimate targets of military attacks